

Improving Public and Media Relations

Razgrad, Stara Zagora, Vidin, and Montana, Bulgaria

Background

In many Bulgarian cities, the mayors' ability to communicate local government accomplishments was limited by insufficient and negative media coverage of municipal activities. This common problem was exacerbated by the proliferation of newspapers and radio stations and the consequent shortage of trained, experienced journalists. Municipalities' lack of both experience in dealing with a free press and understanding of the techniques for improving media relations was also a constraint to communication.

Innovation

In 1993, officials in the City of Stara Zagora (population 150,000) initiated a series of activities to improve their relationships with the media and inform the public of municipal government activities. The Mayor was receiving bad press in his efforts to allocate funds to a school in desperate need of repairs. He had tried to convince the media of the necessity of the repairs, but without success. Finally, he held a "special" news conference in the worst of the classrooms, where the media saw the problems first hand. The result was a complete turnaround in the media's reaction and strong support for renovation of the school.

The innovation was replicated in the Cities of Vidin (population 50,000), Razgrad (population 50,000), and Montana (population 30,000) in 1994 and 1995 as those municipalities recognized the need for full-time public relations directors. The media relations directors hired in each municipality were well qualified, with credentials that included a background in journalism. Training was provided to the media relations directors in using press releases, following up on stories, presenting stories, and optimizing media relations for the municipality.

Results

The municipalities' efforts improved media/local government relations substantially. Mayors took a more active role in communicating their priorities. In one city the mayor opened his weekly staff meetings to the media. Another city began to hold special news conferences regularly. The newly appointed media relations personnel quickly became vital to the administrations' success. A secondary impact was that media relations began to improve immediately as the feeling of distrust began to fade. Mayors reported that the accuracy levels of media reports were improving and that people seemed to be gaining a better understanding of municipal activities. The most serious constraint encountered was in convincing all parties of the genuine good will motivating the change in relations. Changes in leadership have not seemed to affect the program, as the new mayors of Stara Zagora and Vidin are continuing the changes their predecessors began.

This program can be transferred to other CEE and NIS countries with little difficulty. It is already being replicated in Albania, where a similar program has been started and a self-study document has been published in Albanian. The program is relatively inexpensive to implement (the major expense is the salaries of media relations personnel), and the potential for long-lasting return is enormous. The transparency achieved through the program benefits not only local governance but also furthers democratization at the local level.

Summary

To improve the mayors' ability to communicate local government activities, several cities in Bulgaria hired media relations directors. Mayors also held press conferences and invited the media to attend staff meetings. As a result of these efforts, media coverage of government activities increased, and mayors reported that coverage was more accurate.

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